

Great Sand Dunes

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Great Sand Dunes
National Park and Preserve



Access to the Grasslands, Shrublands and Wetlands of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Vicinity

Great Sand Dunes National Park was officially designated in 2004, expanding the boundaries of a small national monument into a park and preserve of over 150,000 acres. Over half of the national park is now grasslands, shrublands, wetlands, and riparian corridors surrounding the main dunefield on three sides.

“There is euphoria in spaciousness...”
- Audrey DeLella Benedict

Geologically, this area is a critical part of the sand system. The *sand sheet*, a vast area of sandy grasslands, shrublands, and small migrating dunes, comprises about 90% of the sand deposit. It is the primary continuing source of sand for the main dunefield. Unexpected springs and *interdunal ponds* appear as oases in the sand sheet. *Riparian corridors* are verdant cottonwood tree-lined streams threading through the sand sheet grasslands. The *sabkha*, west of the sand sheet, is a crusty plain where sand is cemented together by minerals left behind from seasonal wetlands.

The areas of the park are currently seldom visited, so there are outstanding opportunities for solitude, wildlife watching, and the enjoyment of open space.

Before You Go



Burrowing owl
Athene cunicularia

Access to some new areas of the park is currently limited. Please carefully read access information for each area.

It is your responsibility to use a good map and know where you are. Areas that are open to the public are sometimes adjacent to areas that have limited or no access. Check with a ranger if you are uncertain of the locations of open areas.

Items to bring with you: In summer, the sand sheet can become relatively hot

in the afternoon. Bring plenty of water and snacks. Cacti grow in some areas, so **sturdy boots** are a must. **Insect repellent** is recommended for wetlands and some of the grasslands that may have biting gnats or mosquitoes in summer months.

Backpacking is permitted in some of the grassland areas. Obtain a free backcountry permit, available at the Visitor Center.

Please **Leave No Trace**, so that these fragile areas will remain for future generations.

Grasslands and Shrublands



Short-horned lizard
Phrynosoma douglassii

Spacious grasslands and shrublands are the national park’s least visited area, yet they contain diverse wildlife, migrating dunes, panoramic mountain views, wildflower blooms, and intricate beauty.

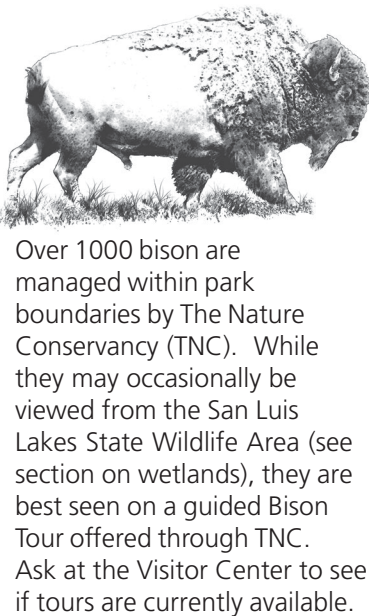
Sand Sheet Loop Trail: This 1/4 mile (0.5 K) trail from the Visitor Center provides a small glimpse into the grassland ecosystem, with interpretive signs along the loop. In summer, look closely for miniature short-horned lizards among the grasses. Their camouflage resembles the sandy soil, so you may not see one until it moves. Please do not try to pick up this protected species.

Trail-less exploration: You may explore on foot for many miles into the park’s grasslands and shrublands from the park entrance road, between the park entrance sign and the Visitor Center. Park at designated pull-outs on the west side of the road. Fences indicate Nature Conservancy boundaries; do not cross any fences without permission. Mid-August is a peak time in wet years to view millions of prairie sunflowers. Prong-horns, kangaroo rats, bullsnakes,

spadefoot toads, vesper sparrows, short-horned lizards, and a variety of raptors are common here.

Access to the grasslands and riparian corridors north of the dunes is possible via public county roads that go through the Baca Grande subdivision to the northern edge of the national park. Ask at the Visitor Center for a map of county roads in this area. Please stay on public roads, and respect any private property. From the park boundary, you may hike on the old Liberty Stage Road, or cross-country away from trails. You may also backpack into this area via the Sand Ramp Trail; ask at the Visitor Center for a free permit. Features of this area include: rolling shrublands and grasslands, huge herds of elk, a crater that some geologists believe is meteoric, cottonwood-lined creeks, and stunning views of the Crestone Peaks.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) manages the historic Medano Ranch, within park boundaries. About 1000 bison roam these grasslands as part of the natural grazing ecology. Public access to TNC lands is currently available on scheduled bison tours or educational seminars. Call 719-378-2904 or -2356 for more information.



Over 1000 bison are managed within park boundaries by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). While they may occasionally be viewed from the San Luis Lakes State Wildlife Area (see section on wetlands), they are best seen on a guided Bison Tour offered through TNC. Ask at the Visitor Center to see if tours are currently available.

Wetlands Within the National Park



Long-billed curlew
Numenius americanus

Medano Creek Wetlands: In late spring and early summer when precipitation is average or above average, wetlands form along Medano Creek at the base of the dunes. These may be accessed by hiking down the streambed toward the end of the cottonwood trees. Some of these are hidden; check with a ranger at the Visitor Center for more details and current conditions. Plains spadefoot toad tadpoles inhabit these pools in spring and early summer, while birds and garter snakes try to catch them.

Wetlands along County Lane 6: During spring runoff, wetlands may form along this road, which is the southern border of the national park.

Please park off the road, and do not cross any fences onto private property.

Interdunal ponds are semi-permanent or permanent features, unexpected oases in the sand. The pond closest to the Visitor Center requires a 6 mile hike over sand. Please contact a ranger for specific directions.

Wetlands and springs managed by The Nature Conservancy: Some of the wetlands within Great Sand Dunes National Park, including Cotton Lake, Dollar Lake, Twin Lakes, Indian Spring, and Little Spring, are currently managed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and are not open to the public except on special tours.

Wetlands Adjacent to the National Park



Slender Spiderflower
Cleome multicaulis

San Luis Lakes State Wildlife Area, adjacent to Great Sand Dunes National Park, contains many wetlands open to the public except during nesting season (closed February 15 - July 15).

This is an excellent area to see shore birds, including white-faced ibis, American avocets, pelicans, snowy plovers, great blue herons, and countless others. Elk occasionally visit the wetlands, and bear have been sighted here eating trapped fish in dry years. Amphibians thrive here, including chorus frogs, three species of toads, and

tiger salamanders.

Enter the wildlife area on the dirt road going north through San Luis Lake State Park, 8 miles west of Highway 150 on County Lane 6. This wildlife area is adjacent to the area managed within the national park by The Nature Conservancy (TNC); occasionally visitors view herds of bison grazing on TNC lands from the safety of the wildlife area. Fences on the east side of the wildlife area indicate Nature Conservancy boundaries; please do not cross without permission.

Other Selected San Luis Valley Wetlands



Sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) are often seen in San Luis Valley wetlands during spring and fall migrations.

The San Luis Valley is a huge arid valley interspersed with countless lush wetlands. While many of the wetlands in and near the national park currently have limited access, these described below are generally open to the public.

Blanca Wetlands are almost other-worldly, with wide, shallow lakes surrounded by whitish, alkali salt flats. The deeper, more vegetated lakes are stocked with warm water fish. Some hardy shore birds and amphibians are also found here, along with unusual plants adapted for the salty, wet, sandy soils. Located between Great Sand Dunes and Alamosa, this area is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Most of the refuge is closed for nesting from February 15 - July 15. Take State Hwy. 150 south from the park to Road 4S at mile marker 3 (3 miles north of US Hwy. 160). Turn right (west), and take this dirt road exactly 8 miles to Baca Lane (Road 116S). Turn right (north) and go 2 miles to the entrance on the right (Road 2S). The wetlands begin about 1 mile east down this road. Stop and pick up a wetlands map at the kiosk.

Alamosa Wetlands is an open space area protecting wetlands near the Rio Grande, just northeast of Alamosa. Developed with hiking trails and nearby parking, it provides easy access for residents and

visitors to Alamosa. Because of this development, less wildlife is generally seen here than at other more remote wetlands. From Highway 17 one mile north of Highway 160, turn west at the Splashland swimming pool. Park along this road in designated lots.

National Wildlife Refuges: Alamosa NWR protects wetlands and cottonwood groves along the Rio Grande, 5 miles southeast of Alamosa. Monte Vista NWR, located 10 miles south of Monte Vista, is a complex of irrigated and agricultural wetlands, a haven for sandhill cranes during spring and fall migration. Both refuges harbor a wide variety of birds. Look for brown highway signs for both refuges along Highway 160. Baca NWR, adjacent to Great Sand Dunes National Park, was designated in 2004 and is not yet open to the public.

Russell Lakes State Wildlife Area is located in the northern part of the San Luis Valley, 10 miles south of the town of Saguache on Highway 285. At 4,000 acres, it is the largest contiguous wetland area managed by the Colorado Division of Wildlife. As with many wetlands, much of it is closed to the public during nesting season, February 15 - July 15. However, the Johnson Lake Trail is open year-round.

Northern leopard frog
Rana pipiens

